

Reflecting on Holocaust Memorial Day

Davis, Francis

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Reflecting on Holocaust Memorial Day

by Professor Francis Davis

Published in *The Catholic Times* on February 2, 2017.

I grew up with Jewish school friends attending their family gatherings. I once had a business partner who had lost most of his family in the German death camps. The smaller extermination centre at Auschwitz, industrialising death, is about the same size as one of the factories we owned and invested in. I often wonder what lessons about ‘productivity’ might have been learned there that we somehow loop into our industrial strategies today. They would have had ‘planning’ meetings just as we did but the stock they worked on would not have been paper or pulp but, instead, bodies- Jewish bodies. Not only Jewish bodies of course for the Nazis also put to death troublesome clergy, disabled people in their hundreds of thousands, homosexuals and gypsies. Meanwhile, during the Bosnian and Croatian wars of independence I worked with the Caritas federation of agencies to provide support to those who had been victims of sexual violence and ethnic cleansing. We provided support for especially rape victims and I spent months visiting field hospitals, isolated rural villages and struggling individuals oftentimes with the sound of guns not far in the distance.

And so it was a humbling honour the other day to meet survivors of those and other genocides as they gathered to commemorate – and never forget . Other guests included the Chief Rabbi and the Bishop of Durham, the Secretary of State for Communities, Sajid Javid, and the Archbishop of Canterbury, Sir Eric Pickles, leading parliamentarians from all the opposition parties, ministers and community representatives from across the UK.

The commemoration, held this year in Westminster’s QE2 Centre, is sombre and moving. It combines music and readings compered by the **Today** Programme’s Mishal Husain. The voice of survivors of the holocaust, from Cambodia, Darfur, Cambodia and Bosnia was clear. One of 6000 events held across the UK it was staged by the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust of which I am a trustee. As the number of survivors from some genocides declines as age rises one of the key questions is how we will never forget what they escaped in the decades to come. And for others how we can ask life can go on especially as other persecutions emerge on the global scene and remind us that what was past is also present.

I am particularly interested in exploring ways that Church schools can increasingly assist in marking this day and resisting tyranny in the future. To anonymise the victims of genocide is to fail them. To light the candles of remembrance is to honour them, their families and to shine a light on the habits of those who might try to perpetrate the same horrors today. When in so many ways Churches have been both culpable and at the heart of resistance to the worse atrocities the mixed embrace of responsibility by many varieties of Christians is notable. But with the rise of ‘hate’ crime across many sectors of society it is challenge within and far beyond the Churches for all that.

The Holocaust Memorial Day Trust is a charity founded by the government to sustain this work. Its trustee board is diverse. Its staff team is able. Its support far reaching but needing to grow. A huge amount of work goes into the educational work, planning, and awareness raising all year and as trustees we are stewards of all this work. The aim is not only to stage the national commemoration but facilitate those thousands of other commemorations. And

provide learning materials for schools and clubs, firms and local authorities to reflect and play their part. In this sense we are the sister charity to *Remembering Srebrenica* which tends to focus on the particular genocidal acts in Bosnia. We convene, too, a forum of all those bodies concerned with similar topics that we might share, collaborate and plan together. For example, the Prime Minister is currently working with colleagues to establish a permanent memorial and learning centre to the Holocaust which will be built just near our own Houses of Parliament. The other day, after our commemoration, the Secretary of State and the Chief Rabbi were going on to a dinner at Number 10 Downing Street to view the first bids for the designs of that centre. A striking step forward.

But on the day, back at the national commemoration, some of those attending had even more pressing and practical concerns. Each year many survivors of the genocides are brought by bus to attend and contribute. Afterwards there is refreshment. As the hot drinks were served afterwards one of the elderly survivors of the Nazi Holocaust and I had a friendly conversation. Seconds later this woman of seemingly great age turned to me and asked 'are you our bus driver to get us home'. Her equally senior friend smiled and commented 'no dear, he's just explained...he's on the committee that helped provided the tea'. As they shuffled away I could not help but reflect what 'soft vengeance' was embodied in their simply being there when so many were lost. And what hope the children and families they reared since symbolise. For in the face of genocide, alongside justice, it is perhaps finding a way to endure that sends some of the most powerful signals to those who deliberately set out to destroy. I cannot say that I shall look forward to next year – but next year will be as significant again.